

Year 2:

Unit 3

Last of the Plains Indians - Westward Expansion and Native Americans (1860 - present): Introduction

Unit Purpose: Why This Unit?

While Reconstruction was unfolding in the South, new conflicts arose in the West. Following the Civil War, Americans increasingly began to move west. However, much of the land in the West was already occupied by Native American tribes. While initial interactions were marked by mutual curiosity and trade, struggles over land led to violent conflicts. The outbreak of what is known collectively as the Indian Wars in the mid-to-late-19th century devastated Native American communities, despite a few successful efforts to fight back. Ultimately, Native Americans were forced off their homes and onto reservations established and promoted by the U.S. government. In 1887, the U.S. government reversed its position on Native American land and passed the Dawes Act, which broke apart reservations and gave Native Americans small “parcels” of land to encourage their assimilation into white American society. Today, a fraction of Native American land remains under tribal control.

The story of westward expansion is traditionally told through the lens of the white settlers and homesteaders moving out West: stories of the Oregon Trail, life on the frontier, and cowboys dominate this narrative. While these stories are important to the foundations of our nation — and play a significant role still in this unit — this unit instead reframes the story through the eyes of the “conquered.” As American settlers “won the West,” many Native Americans lost their homes, their loved ones, and their livelihoods; tribal cultures, once thriving, grew weaker as tribes were separated and forced to assimilate. Today, the legacy of Indian removal policies, reservation policies, the Dawes Act, and further legislation through the 20th and into the 21st century has continued to shape Native American communities across the country, who experience higher rates of poverty, suicide, alcoholism, and domestic abuse than any other group of people in the United States.

Unit 3 is a Project-Based Learning unit, emphasizing interdisciplinary perspectives through projects and simulations. Scholars will use these creative endeavors to engage with complex and challenging historical themes. This unit demands reading critically, drawing upon evidence to create convincing projects, and

expressing arguments creatively both in projects and in writing. Because this is a Project-Based Learning unit, there are 90 minutes dedicated to each lesson, rather than the usual 50 minutes.

To best invest your scholars in this unit, organize a showcase or presentation of scholar work at the end of the unit!

Note: We recommend teaching this unit concurrently with the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie in your ELA classes.

Unit 3 Learning Goals

Essential Question

If you are successful in this unit, your scholars will be able to answer the Unit 3 Essential Question: *How did westward expansion and government policies affect Native American communities after the Civil War?*

Big Ideas

The Big Ideas, outlined below, help answer the Unit 3 Essential Question and reflect the key ideas scholars must master by the end of this unit. As you teach Unit 3, connect every lesson back to the Big Idea(s) that the lesson helps illustrate. The Unit 3 Big Ideas were adapted from the UCLA National History Standards United States History Era 4 and United States History Era 6.

- **Big Idea 1: As the United States began expanding its territory westward in the 19th century, western settlers encroached on tribal lands, sparking violent conflicts with Native Americans.**
 - In the years before the Civil War, Native American interactions with Americans were mostly peaceful. As settlers began moving to the frontier following the Civil War, however, interactions began to grow more hostile, as settlers began farming on tribal lands.
 - Despite peaceful early interactions, by the mid-19th century, settlers generally characterized the Native Americans as violent savages and as a threat to their peace and security on the frontier. Native Americans, who had once thought more favorably of the newcomers, soon saw settlers as a threat to their livelihood as well.
 - These tensions over land and negative perceptions of the other led to the breakout of a series of battles across the western United States, known collectively as the Indian Wars.
- **Big Idea 2: After the Civil War, federal American Indian policy pushed Native Americans off their land and attempted to destroy tribal unity and identity through forced assimilation into white American society.**
 - Initially, federal American Indian policy used treaties and military force to push Native Americans off of their land and onto reservations.
 - Following the end of the Indian Wars, American Indian policy evolved with the passage of the Dawes Act of 1887, which broke up reservations into individual plots of land for Native Americans. The law's official purpose was to help promote Native American assimilation into white society; in reality, the law took away even more land from Native American communities and sold it to settlers.

- The Dawes Act and the subsequent assimilation policies, such as Indian boarding schools, helped destroy tribal unity and threatened the preservation of Native American cultural traditions.
- **Big Idea 3: Today, Native American communities are still working to overcome the long-term effects of federal American Indian policies and frontier conflicts on their societies and cultures.**
 - Native Americans continue to conflict with the United States over land ownership and rights to preserve their sacred grounds.
 - Native American reservations today are among the most impoverished communities in the United States, with high levels of alcoholism, depression, and sexual assault.
 - Many tribal communities still struggle to maintain their own cultural traditions in the face of cultural assimilation.

Key Terms

The following people, places, and events are foundational to understanding the Big Ideas of this unit. As these words are introduced in each lesson, add them to your word wall and hold scholars accountable for using them in discussion and writing throughout the unit.

- The Spokane
- The Sioux
- The Nez Perce
- The Great Plains
- Buffalo
- Westward expansion
- Homestead Act
- Pacific Railway Act
- Transcontinental Railroad
- Lakota
- Crazy Horse
- General Custer
- Indian Wars
- Battle of Little Bighorn
- Reservations
- Wounded Knee Massacre
- Ghost Dance
- Dawes Act
- Assimilation
- Indian schools

The following places are foundational to understanding the geographical context of the unit. As you teach Unit 3, continually reference maps in class not only to build scholar fluency with geography, but also to develop scholars' geographic reasoning skills as they grapple with the Big Ideas of the unit.

- **Major Native American territory, before European arrival:** The Great Plains, the Northeast, the Northwest Coast, the Plateau, the Southeast, the Southwest, the Great Basin, and California tribal regions
- **Major sites of conflict on the frontier:** Sand Creek Massacre, Battle of Little Bighorn, Wounded Knee Massacre, and the Battle of Bear Paw
- **Major reservations today:** Pine Ridge Reservation, Standing Rock Reservation, Navajo Nation, and Nez Perce Indian Reservation

Intellectual Preparation

Class Materials Once you have internalized the Big Ideas of the unit, to be successful, you must study all scholar documents and materials before you teach the first lesson:

- All documents in the [Unit 3 Sourcebook](#)
- All scholar and teacher materials in the [Unit 3 Workbook](#)

Additional Resources The resources below provide additional historical background for the content covered in Unit 3:

- Before diving into Unit 3, make sure you read “American Indian vs. Native American” on Slate and “Teaching Hard History” on the Southern Poverty Law Center website to understand the premortems for teaching about Native Americans in this unit.
- Review “The West: 1860–1900” timeline on the PBS website.
- Read “A New Era of Autonomy for the American Indian” and “The Civil War and Reconstruction in the American West” on the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History* website; “Where the Buffalo No Longer Roamed” on the [Smithsonian](#) magazine website, and “A Thirty Years War” on the University of Houston Digital History website.
- Watch the video [Crash Course History: Westward Expansion](#) on YouTube.

*To access these readings and more free American History content and resources, create an account on the Gilder Lehrman Institute website.

Unit 3 Lesson Sequence

Essential Question: How did westward expansion and government policies affect Native American communities after the Civil War?

The first three lessons introduce scholars to the complex relationship that emerged between American settlers and Native Americans on the western frontier. Lesson 1 introduces scholars to the evolving relationship between Native Americans and settlers, from their earliest and most peaceful interactions in the early 19th century, to the rise of animosity following the Civil War. In Lessons 2 and 3, scholars will assume the perspective of a Native American or a western settler

and write a narrative piece that illustrates the tense relationship between the two groups. By the end of these lessons, scholars will understand the origins of conflict on the frontier and will be prepared to examine how and why violence erupted soon after the arrival of western settlers.

Lesson 1: The Western Frontier (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How have Native American and settler encounters on the western frontier evolved over time?

Lessons 2–3: Native Americans and Western Settlers (Writing Seminar)

- **Central Question:** How did western settlers and Native Americans view one another following the Civil War?

The following three lessons develop scholars' understanding of the conflicts on the western frontier. In Lesson 4, scholars will examine how disagreements over land and negative stereotypes of the other, as well as tribal resistance to federal reservation policies, led to the outbreak of war. In Lessons 5 and 6, scholars will assume the perspective of a Native American to again write a narrative piece that illustrates how the Indian Wars ultimately destroyed many Native American communities and led to the near complete removal of Native Americans from their tribal lands and onto government-determined reservations. By the end of Lesson 6, scholars will be able to articulate how westward expansion and the government policies that supported it ultimately led to the destruction of traditional tribal communities in the West and will be prepared to examine how federal Indian policy continued to evolve following the Indian Wars.

Lesson 4: The Indian Wars (Video and Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** Why did war erupt on the western frontier?

Lessons 5–6: Impact of the Indian Wars (Writing Seminar)

- **Central Question:** How did the Indian Wars affect Native American communities in the West?

In Lessons 7 through 9, scholars will examine how federal American Indian policies evolved following the end of the Indian Wars and how these policies continue to affect Native American communities. In Lesson 7, scholars will simulate a congressional debate over the Dawes Act to understand why Congress passed the act and how it aimed to encourage Native American assimilation into white American society while also gaining control of former tribal lands. In Lesson 8, scholars will create cartoons to illustrate the effects of the assimilation policies adopted by the federal government on Native Americans communities, especially to their land and to their cultural identities. In Lesson 9, scholars will examine how federal American Indian policies have continued to evolve over the course of the 20th century, using maps to illustrate the slow loss of control over tribal lands over time. By the end of these lessons, scholars will be able to articulate how post-Indian War policies affected tribal land and culture and be prepared to examine the lasting legacy of these policies.

Lesson 7: The Dawes Act (Simulation)

- **Central Question:** Why did the United States pass the Dawes Act?

Lesson 8: Assimilation (PBL)

- **Central Question:** Why did the United States adopt assimilation policies at the end of the 19th century?

Lesson 9: Tribal Territory throughout American History (Map Study)

- **Central Question:** How did U.S. government policies affect Native American territories over time?

The final three lessons prepare scholars to research, plan, and present about the lasting legacy of the conflicts and policies of the 19th century in Native American communities today in their trifold projects for the Winter Academics Showcase. In Lesson 10, scholars will explore the various topics for research and choose one topic to deeply research for their presentations. In Lesson 11, scholars will organize their research from the previous lesson and plan trifolds that convey an argument about their chosen topics. In Lesson 12, scholars will create their final trifolds based on these plans and practice oral presentations about their chosen topics. By the end of Lesson 12, scholars must be prepared to present their trifold presentations orally to explain how government policies not only affected Native Americans in the 19th century, but also how they continue to affect Native American communities in the present day.

Lessons 10–12: Native Americans Today (Gallery Walk and Independent Research)

- **Central Question:** How does federal American Indian policy continue to affect Native American communities today?

Premortems and Solutions

Facilitating meaningful Project-Based Learning (PBL) is challenging because there are materials to manage and the work is open-ended. But this is the very reason why it is important and engaging for our scholars. The lessons in this unit are 90 minutes to ensure that you have enough time to fully engage in each project.

Your level of preparation and your clarity of purpose make all the difference. The purpose of every project should be clear in every lesson, and you must ensure that you connect these projects to the purpose of the lesson and the Unit Essential Question.

Guard against exploration without rigor! Whether in the classroom studying a text or crafting a project, scholars' experiences should spark questions and further investigation about the topic. Do not be fooled by beautiful projects that have little or no historical relevance. Just like with writing, PBL demands that scholars have an idea. Guard against project work that expresses details without an idea by constantly asking scholars what idea their project work is trying to prove and by having sky-high expectations for the quality of ideas in the projects. Similarly, all captions should first and foremost express the idea conveyed in the image rather than highlighting the details of the image. The point of these PBLs is to use creative means to convince the viewer of an idea. Therefore, scholar project work must always be grounded in accurate and compelling historical evidence to prove their ideas. Projects with strong historical arguments should be valorized, regardless of artistic talent.

Make sure that the goals of history class are not lost in the midst of project work. Continue to emphasize the Habits of Great Readers, Writers, and Historians in every class.

Scholars will work with a variety of materials as they create their projects. Develop a plan to manage the materials, but keep the focus on the content!

In this unit, the terms "Native Americans" and "American Indians" are used interchangeably. Because neither term is an ideal epithet for the native peoples of the Americas, when possible, refer to native peoples by their tribal names instead.